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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000560

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [KBTS](#) [UNOMIG](#) [UNSC](#) [RS](#) [IR](#) [IS](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: IRAN FEELING INSECURE IN CAUCASUS

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Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and comment. In a readout to the Ambassador of his recent visit to Iran, Reintegration Minister Temuri Yakobashvili suggested that the Iranians seemed paranoid about potential threats and rivals for regional influence. Russia had effectively fueled that paranoia with allegations of U.S. plans to use Georgia as a staging ground for attacks on Iran. Likewise, Israel is supposedly planning to use the UAVs it has sold to Georgia to attack Iran. Iran does not trust Russia either, however, and sees Turkey's proposed Caucasus platform as an effort to take a leadership role in the region -- a role Iran considers rightfully its own, along with its self-perceived leadership of the Islamic world. Yakobashvili saw three basic attitudes toward the west in Iran: openness and optimism, held by the population at large; open but calculating skepticism, held by the bureaucracy; and extremely hesitant caution, held by the top leadership. The people are mostly concerned with the economy. Yakobashvili compared the level of state control to that of the USSR, but two key differences -- the existence of private property and the ability of people to travel -- serve as a sufficient safety valve to prevent frustration from exploding. End summary.

PARANOIA, THE DESTROYER

¶2. (C) Yakobashvili, Georgia's only Jewish member of the Cabinet, traveled to Tehran with Deputy Foreign Minister Nalbandov (reftel), but stayed an additional day and had separate meetings. During a March 18 conversation with the Ambassador, he stated several times the Iranians were paranoid and advised the United States to keep that fact in mind. As Yakobashvili was waiting at the airport to depart Tehran, Iranian officials approached him with documents supplied by the Russians supposedly proving that the United States was planning to attack Iran from bases in Georgia. In earlier meetings, officials asked Yakobashvili why Georgia wanted to join NATO, suggesting that this step would only allow the U.S. to establish bases in Georgia. Iranian officials also asked Yakobashvili about unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) Georgia had acquired from Israel, expressing the concern that Israel planned to use them to attack Iran. They even asked how many Israelis had died in South Ossetia, ostensibly fighting for the Georgian government during the August war with Russia. Yakobashvili pushed back on these allegations, asking the Iranians if they were aware that the Russians were manipulating them; their answer was that they had invited him to Iran for precisely that reason, apparently as a check on the Russians' allegations.

13. (C) Yakobashvili suggested Iran put up with Russian manipulation because it felt threatened and isolated and knew it needed Russia. At the same time, he thought Iran did not trust Russia and was wary of excessive Russian influence in the region. Likewise, he said the Iranians were very concerned about potential Turkish influence; they asked about the proposed Caucasus Platform at every meeting, making clear they did not like the idea. He thought Iran saw itself as a leader in both the Caucasus region and the Islamic world and a leader in both the Caucasus region and the Islamic world and considered Turkey a rival for both roles. He noted Iranian contempt for Arabs as well, which he saw expressed in a video entitled "Homo Arabicus" while in Iran. Although they did not admit it was a defeat, the Iranians did express concern to Yakobashvili over the recent conflict in Gaza -- and he thought they did in fact realize it was a defeat, especially for their hopes of establishing themselves as a leader in the Islamic world. Yakobashvili also emphasized that the Iran-Iraq war still is a key frame of reference for Iran; reminders of it are everywhere, and the perceived role of the U.S. and the EU in supporting Saddam Hussein against Iran is still resented.

I HOPE TOMORROW WE'LL FIND BETTER THINGS

14. (C) In Yakobashvili's assessment, the Iranian people fit in to three broad societal groups, each of which had a different attitude toward re-engagement with the west. First, he said the population at large was open to the idea and optimistic about the possibilities; its main concern was the global economic crisis. He said that the people found recent moves to limit consumption of gasoline by civilians (while not by the government or businesses) distressing. He noted that Iran has everything you could want in a tourist

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destination -- Isfahan, for example, was a beautiful and modern city -- but no tourists. Second, he said mid-career bureaucrats were also open to engagement, but skeptical and cautious; they saw the current global political environment as a "bazaar," where the different sides would have to negotiate to obtain the best result for their own interests. Finally, although he did not say the top leadership was opposed to engagement, he thought they were looking for ways to delay it for now. He portrayed the government's interest in nuclear weapons as primarily a bargaining chip; being on the verge of achieving a nuclear device would almost be better than actually having it, because it would keep the west's attention and allow Iran to extract more concessions.

15. (C) As a former Soviet citizen, Yakobashvili saw many similarities between the oppression of the Iranian regime and that of the Soviets. Nevertheless, he suggested two key elements of society served as a safety valve for societal frustration and made a collapse of Iran unlikely: the existence of private property and the ability of people to travel. He noted the widespread existence of satellite dishes (although many are kept covered), for example, and that Iran is one of the world's foremost consumers of expensive women's clothes. He said that Iranian intellectuals hate the mullahs, but recognize they cannot challenge them at this time. He also noted a grudging respect for the mullahs' role in restoring Iran to a place of prominence; 150 years ago, Iran was nothing, but these "idiots" had at least managed to restore Iranian national pride.
TEFFT